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REP Event Summary 2011/1

# Local and Regional Politics in the Ferghana Valley

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Why consider the Ferghana Valley as a region? It has a local and a regional dynamic. It is among the most densely populated areas in the former Soviet Union. The potential for conflicts has long been present, and as we have seen over the past year, violence can flare up quickly.

Regarding local factors, there is growing dissatisfaction with the economic and social situation. People feel they have no prospects unless they are well connected, and they face difficulties when trying to access resources. People resent the corruption and express a widespread lack of trust in the current political systems. There is also the problem of illegal markets and drug trafficking. There seems to be considerable instability in the area: the minority communities often feel they have no prospect of acquiring a voice; for example, the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan is not represented in the country's army or law enforcement agencies.

Tensions are often linked to differences in socio-economic practices. The Kyrgyz communities are more rural, the Uzbeks more urban. Uzbeks would describe themselves as traditional but are considered conservative by the Kyrgyz, who see themselves as more modern. There is a tendency for the youth to become more religious, especially in Tajikistan. Religious movements are perceived as a threat by the elite. Activities under the label of counter-terrorism by the governments contrast with local communities often feeling themselves victims of government interference.

Regional factors also contribute to the concentration of problems in and around the Ferghana Valley. There are tensions over border demarcation among the three states and a risk of people being isolated as soon as tensions flare up. The possibility of border closures has had a strong impact on communities in the region. A large number of Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan fled to Uzbekistan during the violent events in Osh; since their return, they feel that borders will not be open again should such a crisis reoccur. There is a feeling that local tensions could have consequences beyond the borders. There is also a worry about the consequences of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

A strong potential for violence will remain in the region. It is quite possible there will be localised outbreaks of violence in the coming year. However, even sporadic violence could quickly cause major problems. There does not seem to be a way to prevent these events from happening.

### Questions and discussion:

A member of the audience asked how the speaker interpreted the violence in Rasht and what the causes were. There are many different levels of interpretation of these events by locals. The 'security operations' in Rasht were seen as a threat from the authorities. Local people say that they have gradually lost representation in the political system and access to the circles of power. In addition, corruption has increased. The feeling of resentment visible during the civil war is still present. Tensions are not new, but previous incidents elsewhere did not lead to an entire valley or other area communication means being shut off for weeks. The heavy losses on the side of the law enforcement agencies and the military are a striking feature of the Rasht Valley events. The losses are damaging for the authorities, but they also show their determination not to let go.

Another participant commented that the current situation was really worrying; people do not know what is going on and whom and why they are fighting. Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon is gradually getting rid of the war lords who put him in power after the civil war, such as former insurgent commander Mirzokhuja Akhmadov.

An expert asked whether there was a possibility for a regional organisation to coordinate cooperation on these issues, given it is logical to look at this Valley as a single entity. Is there scope for work across the region? In response, it was said inter-regional cooperation became more difficult after the fall of the Soviet Union. The states are still going through a state-building exercise to some extent. Support for regional cooperation is not in line with their current definitions of themselves as nations; the overall tendency then is for these particular governments to adopt a nationalistic rather than a multi-ethnic view. It should be said that this type of tension occurs between the ruling elites, not the population in general. The West does not have sufficient power to engage the states on this level. In addition, the participant asked whether an early warning system could be created to prevent sporadic violence from escalating. As for an early warning system, there is no ideal model. For now, our best chance is to make sure that people are listened to.

A participant made a comment regarding the sense of local identity felt in the Ferghana Valley, which is not encouraged by the authorities. There have been initiatives to build highways connecting the cities in the region but people who had advanced them were arrested. Nationalism is on the rise in Ferghana Valley states, and even football matches can spark violence. The participant asked whether this was a problem of an economic nature caused by population density and migration, or rather a problem of an ideological

nature. The speaker agreed that one increasingly sees nationalism defined on an ethnic basis, with politicians using nationalist language. The question is whether the authorities are exploiting the situation or trying to unite a majority of their people behind the government. In other words, are they exploiting nationalism that exists on a local level, or actively promoting it? In the speaker's opinion, the authorities have enough problems even without ethnic tensions and have little reason to fuel them. But they have not come up with a replacement identity with which their citizens can identify.

The next question was about the current state of inter-ethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan. Are inter-ethnic relations still a driving force for tensions? What is the current position of ethnic minorities? Is ethnic tension common to all Central Asian countries or peculiar to Kyrgyzstan? In response, it was said that even given significant goodwill, the events of last summer have left a mark. The events were traumatic not only for Uzbeks but also for Kyrgyz. One cannot expect the two groups to be ready for reconciliation quickly. The communities need time to absorb what happened. There have been many words and promises, but few concrete steps. The focus of the international community has mostly been on Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in the south, but there are problems in northern Kyrgyzstan as well as shown in spring 2010. In the Karakol area, ICRC officials recently saw wall graffiti containing threats against Uighurs and Uzbeks. The issue of land ownership is important in Kyrgyzstan. Attention is usually focused on minority enclaves, but many communities are mixed. It will require a strong will for Kyrgyzstan to recognise itself as a multi-ethnic society. There is potential for conflict in other areas too: Tajik-Uzbek relations in Tajikistan could become tense as was the case during the civil war. A participant commented that the lack of resources was a problem, and even Bishkek is vulnerable to this. Land seizures are widespread too.

The next question was about the perception that if one country is afflicted by ethnic conflict, the neighbouring countries exploit the crisis for their own ends. But during the events in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan acted honourably. Did the Kyrgyz perception of Uzbekistan change? In reply, it was said that the situation was viewed on three different levels: at the government level, the response was positive and there was praise for the Uzbek government's reaction to the crisis.

However, the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan saw the matter in a different light; they felt abandoned by their Uzbek brothers for not making any effort to prevent the violence or intervene. Looking at the relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, there has been constant animosity in public rhetoric. This

does not affect people's daily lives. Still, people say that as soon as there is ethnic tension in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan will have a stake in it, and not necessarily a positive one. Thus, Uzbekistan's response to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan did not improve its image in Tajikistan.

Another participant asked about the ICRC's presence in Andijan during the refugee crisis, in particular the organisation's interaction with the Uzbekistani government. The participant also asked about the methods the Tashkent government used to encourage the refugees to return.

In reply, it was said that given the ICRC's long-term presence in Uzbekistan and their strong relations with the National Society of the Red Crescent, close to communities on the ground, the government actually asked for their help when that crisis started. At the same time, the ICRC recognised the authority of the Uzbekistani government and respected their rules and procedures. The government response was impressive even though they were only prepared for a much lower number of refugees.

As for the return of the refugees, it was not only the Uzbekistani government that encouraged them to return, the Kyrgyzstani authorities did too. Kyrgyzstani officials stressed that it was important for the refugees to come back and participate in the upcoming referendum. The refugees understood there was a risk they would be separated from their families for a long time. Most of the refugees were women, they were not ready for separation from their husbands. Men also encouraged their families to come back. Group pressure was big; many people would have preferred to wait but thought the border would be closed and they would be trapped. They would either return or would have to be prepared for a long-term stay in Uzbekistan. Neighbouring countries see receiving so many refugees as risky; unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan decided to close the border. Those who fled to Tajikistan realised that while they were accepted, they were not necessarily supported. Central Asian governments do not encourage massive movement of population.

The next question enquired about the efficacy of bilateral versus multilateral engagement. In response, it was said that engaging with Russia would be key, whether via the Collective Security Treaty Organisation or other channels. There is a need for western organisations to reconsider the peacekeeping tools they have been using in the region. They should be more attentive to the countries' needs. More thought should be given to the nature of the political processes in the former Soviet Union; for example, the western approach to civil society is very different to the approach in Uzbekistan.

People organise themselves differently in terms of expressing concerns and making their voices heard. Some of the tools used in the FSU should be integrated with the international efforts. There has been little dialogue on what these countries have in common.

A member of the audience commented that the lack of national identity in Tajikistan was the main reason behind the civil war in the 1990s. The participant argued that people are becoming increasingly united behind a religious identity. She also said there was a danger of radicalisation, and religious identity may substitute national identity in the future. Another participant disagreed, saying it was impossible to reduce identity to one aspect; there were multiple levels to a person's identity. It was then noted that victims of violence tend to define themselves in exclusive terms but they may not have always done that.

The discussion then returned to Kyrgyzstan, specifically the plan to rebuild Osh. According to the mayor of Osh, the aim is to redesign the city to make different groups live together and intermingle. This has been criticised by local groups. The plan has been presented as a way for Osh to become a small Hong Kong, and there have been rumours of possible Chinese support. It is widely known that the money required for reconstruction is not available now, but people are worried about what could come in the future. There could be more political support for it with the new coalition in power, with which the mayor feels more secure. The market area has already been reorganised. China is indeed interested in stability in the region and it has been very active in ground level trade. There are important trade routes linking China with the Central Asian states. In fact, one of these routes crosses Osh and the violent events of last summer involved a fight for control over this route, as well as the drug trade. Chinese influence is very strong in Tajikistan too. However, while the Chinese government has often used the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to negotiate trade agreements, it has not used this platform to promote regional stability or prevent crises. There has already been significant migration from the Ferghana Valley to Russia and Kazakhstan.

In conclusion, the speaker mentioned the Rasht Valley and other areas in Tajikistan as points where minor events could tip the precarious balance in the region and lead to more violence. The worst case scenario would involve interconnected, violent events in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Sparking violence in the region is very easy, especially if minor events are used by armed groups for their own purposes.